

The Price of Honor: Confederate Veterans' Dilemma in the Gilded Age

Charleston, West Virginia

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In the United Confederate Veteran rulebook on the Order of Business, By-laws, and Constitution it states, “Any person of good character who was regularly enlisted in active service and served *honorably* in the Confederate States Army, or Navy, may be admitted to membership in this Camp.” (emphasis added).¹ In the late nineteenth century competing definitions of honor divided former Confederates living in Charleston, West Virginia. These divisions reveal that there was not a united Confederate presence in the city. The United Confederate Veterans Stonewall Jackson Camp was originally created in the early 1890s, and had accumulated a sizeable membership of almost 250 veterans.² Its work encompassed several public dedications including the erecting of a bronze statue of Stonewall Jackson on the state capitol grounds and the creation of a park dedicated to local Confederate company, the Kanawha Riflemen.³ The Camp along with its sister organization, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, also held social gatherings and asked for donations toward such projects as a soldiers’ home for former Confederate West Virginians located in Charleston.⁴ However, despite their dedication to the cause, after the war, several members in the Stonewall Jackson Camp had not been as dedicated during war time. Disputes over the definition of honor fractured the unity of the veterans in Charleston.

In 2001 David Blight released his groundbreaking work *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American History*. In it he argued that three aspects of memory emerged from the war: the emancipationist element, the reunion and reconciliationist element, and lastly the white

¹ *Camp Garnett Confederate Veterans*, United Confederate Veterans Records, West Virginia State Archives, Charleston WV.

² Rosters and Membership Records, 1893 -1915, *United Confederate Veterans Records* , West Virginia State Archives Library, Charleston WV.

³ S.A. Cunningham, “Confederate Monument in West Virginia,” *Confederate Veteran* 19, no. 12 (Dec. 1911) 558-559.

⁴ *Charleston Gazette*, “Lee’s Birthday,” January 24th, 1907. Found within the *United Confederate Veterans Records*, West Virginia State Archives Library, Charleston WV.

supremacist element. These elements emerged through the efforts of veterans and women's organizations to justify the meaning of the two sides' respective wartime causes. By the fifty year anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg, the white supremacist and reconciliationist elements had teamed up to obscure the emancipationist element within public remembrance of the Civil War.⁵ Since Blight's study of Civil War memory other historians have sought to apply his interpretive model toward particular states, battles, or organizations.⁶ However, what the field needed was a constructive argument; it needed a rebuttal to Blight's interpretation. In 2013, the field got its rebuttal. Straight off the heels of her study of the role gender played in shaping public remembrance of the war, historian Caroline Janney offered a new interpretation. In *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation*, Janney argues that reunion between the two sections did not necessarily mean reconciliation as both sides fought after the war for control of its lasting memory. By lumping reunion with reconciliation, she suggested Blight had obscured the lingering animosity between the two sides and ignored the new battlefields that were opened at the close of the war.⁷

⁵ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001).

⁶ While it would be near impossible to incorporate the entirety of historiographical contributions to the study of Civil War memory, interested readers would benefit from reading several books that deal with aspects of Civil War memory. Karen Cox's *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003) studies the influence of the U.D.C. in shaping the Confederate legacy. David Goldfield's *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History*, Updated Edition (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004) remains one of the premiere and still highly praised depictions of the South's responses to the unsettled issues left from the Civil War. Anne E. Marshall's *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2010) follows much of the issues raised by this essay with a particular emphasis on demonstrating the unity as opposed to the divided Confederate presence within a border state. Alice Fahs' and Joan Waugh's book, *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) is a collection of essays with a wide ranging scope including a follow up of David Blight's work detailing the importance and evolution of Decoration Day ceremonies (now called Memorial Day). W. Stuart Towns' *Enduring Legacy: Rhetoric and Ritual of the Lost Cause* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012) encapsulates how the Lost Cause molded Confederate memory and is one of the few works on Civil War memory to continue to the modern day. I stress that these books are not a comprehensive historiography, but allow for an interested reader to become well acquainted with the variety that Civil War memorial studies have produced.

⁷ Caroline Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

This essay takes Janney's message about reconciliation a step further by illustrating that conflict did not simply arise between Union and Confederate veterans. Veterans within both sides clashed over interpretations of the war and how best to portray those ideals. These conflicts within the two sides are best demonstrated in the border state of West Virginia, a state born of the war itself. Within this new state, a large gathering of veterans of both sides had to co-exist. Reconciliation played out "on the ground" as the two sides were in open conversation and often had to share the same cemeteries, churches, and streets to commemorate their respective portrayals of the war. These matters were complicated further when bickering within the groups caused the fracturing of a unified remembrance of the war, and the emergence of a third party group.

In the early 1880s before the creation of the United Confederate Veterans, Confederate veterans gathered in a fraternal organization to preserve the camaraderie of their war years. This Camp known as Camp Patton named for the colonel of the 22nd Virginia Regiment and Charleston native, George S. Patton.⁸ One of the members was a recent arrival from Rockbridge County who had come to Charleston after quitting the life of a farmer. James Z. McChesney had been a distinguished Confederate soldier, serving in the Battles of McDowell, Brandy Station, Gettysburg, and many others. In the early months of 1865, McChesney suffered a severe saber cut to the face that caused typhus and made his "lower jaw sloughed off." He spent the remainder of the war recovering from these wounds in an army hospital and then was paroled near Staunton, Virginia in May.⁹ During the 1870s, McChesney moved his wife and three kids to

⁸ United Daughters of the Confederacy, pamphlet containing plan for Confederate Veteran Soldiers' Home, *United Daughters of the Confederacy Records, WV Division 1899-1919*. West Virginia State Archives Library, Charleston, WV.

⁹ This biographical information was taken from both: Richard Armstrong, *11th Virginia Cavalry* in the Virginia Regimental History Series (Lynchburg: H.E. Howard, 1989). ; Robert J. Driver, *14th Virginia Cavalry* in the Virginia Regimental History Series (Lynchburg: H. E. Howard, 1988).

Charleston to start his new life as an insurance agent.¹⁰ While a member of Camp Patton, McChesney would meet several influential Charleston veterans including Dr. John F. Wilcox, Samuel Slaughter Green, and John W. Vickers.

Camp Patton was dissolved sometime in the early 1890s and a new Camp was formed under the name Camp Stonewall Jackson. This new camp run by several of these prominent Charleston Confederates (notably S.S. Green and John Wilcox) was organized as a company under state law in order to help the Camp purchase and inherit land given for a soldiers' home. Although the soldiers' home was never built due to insufficient funding, the Camp still retained the rights to several acres of land and used it to create its own cemetery for veterans.¹¹

Trouble arose within the group in October 1907, when the newly elected Adjutant of the organization, McChesney, asked former Major General Bennett H. Young, about the service record of the Camp's Commander, John Wilcox.¹² McChesney felt it was his duty as adjutant (essentially record keeper) of the camp to assure the authenticity of all of the Camp's members. However, upon hearing of such a letter, Wilcox requested the letter back from General Young before he could reply to the Adjutant's inquiry. McChesney was brought under insubordination charges by Wilcox and Vice-Commander, John Vickers for conduct unbecoming to a member of the camp. At the next meeting on Oct. 28th, 1907, a three person committee was appointed to interview McChesney about his actions, and to deem if his explanation was satisfactory.

¹⁰ Stationary from many of James McChesney's personal papers list his designation as an agent of the John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company.

¹¹ *Land Deeds, 1905-1907*, United Confederate Veterans Records, West Virginia State Archives, Charleston, WV.; *Stonewall Jackson Camp vs. Alderson*, United Confederate Veterans Records, West Virginia State Archives, Charleston WV.

¹² James Z. McChesney, letter to General Bennett Young, located within the Minutes of the Stonewall Jackson Camp Records, within the *United Confederate Veterans Records*. West Virginia State Archives Library, Charleston, WV.

McChesney no doubt conveyed his intentions of attempting to determine the authenticity of the Camp's members, but the three member committee refused this answer. A vote was taken to remove McChesney from his post as Adjutant. Eight of the ten voters agreed to force his resignation even though the Camp had over a hundred members at the time who were in all likelihood uninformed of the insubordination charges.¹³

McChesney did not give up so easily, and refused to resign upon being dismissed. On February, 24th 1908, a meeting was held that had over nineteen members present (almost twice the number of members from the previous meeting that had forced McChesney out). A motion was called and passed reinstating McChesney and then clearing him of any wrongdoing.¹⁴ Although the investigation had been concluded a divide began to emerge between the members of the Camp. A faction emerged in support of the actions of Dr. Wilcox and a faction emerged that supported McChesney. In a submission to an investigatory board of the national organization one of the individuals argued that the McChesney faction entered into the regular meeting room during a scheduled meeting of the Camp and commenced running the meeting as if the aforementioned individuals were not there.¹⁵ This McChesney faction included anywhere from ten to sixteen people, and the faction was more than twice the size of those who had regularly attended meetings before the controversy. McChesney explained that upon returning to his post he had attempted to claim the record books from S.S. Green and J.W. Vickers who both had pleaded business as an excuse for being out of town. When McChesney had cornered them at their place of business they had taken him to Dr. Wilcox who refused to give the books back to

¹³ A paraphrase of the minutes included under James Z. McChesney, United Confederate Veterans Records, *Minutes of Stonewall Jackson Camp #878, 1907 – 1908*, West Virginia State Archives, Charleston WV. 1-4.

¹⁴ James Z. McChesney, *Minutes*, 7-8.

¹⁵ *In Defense of J.F. Wilcox*, United Confederate Veterans Records, West Virginia State Archives, Charleston WV. 6-7.

McChesney since the motion reinstating him to office had not been passed by a complete quorum.¹⁶

The two factions would continue to operate as separate organizations both claiming the name of the Stonewall Jackson Camp and conducting meetings at separate times and places. Although nominally having over a hundred members it appears that only a third of registered members were active within the Camp. Of those that were active, many of them sided with McChesney.¹⁷ The pro-Wilcox faction consisted of members who were very well known throughout Charleston. Dr. J. F Wilcox, was a practicing physician in Charleston and was friends with several influential members of the Charleston elite.¹⁸ John Q. Dickinson was one such friend, a veteran, and the last remaining scion of a wealthy family connected to the salt industry in early Kanawha County.¹⁹ Samuel S. Green was a prominent lawyer in Charleston and represented many of the pro-Wilcox faction and was the Camp's nominal attorney. Dr. Laurence Carr was another physician who came from an extremely wealthy family. The remaining members were also associated with these individuals and came from similar backgrounds.

Business was conducted by both sides for over fourteen months with each side still retaining the name of the Stonewall Jackson Camp. McChesney and his faction included between 8-18 members and inducted three additional members in the space of 14 months.²⁰ Both sides appealed to the state and national board to resolve the matter but neither were willing to

¹⁶ James Z. McChesney, *Minutes*, 9-10.

¹⁷ This is felt when looking through the rosters of the Stonewall Jackson Camp, although they show a list of over one hundred members, when checked with the minutes of the Camp it can be seen that only around twenty of the members participated regularly, i.e. more than once, and less than ten did so meeting after meeting.

¹⁸ W.S. Laidley, *History of Charleston and Kanawha County West Virginia and Representative Citizens*, 2nd edition (Chicago: Richmond-Arnold Publishing Co., 1993) 955.

¹⁹ W.S. Laidley, *History of Charleston*, 1003.

²⁰ James Z. McChesney, *Minutes*, 9-10.

intervene. The records of both camps suggest downright hostility toward one another. Aside from the aforementioned withholding of the Camp's records, the pro-Wilcox faction claimed that the other had purposely falsified records and sent them to the national organization in order to obtain the ribbons for delegates to attend the national convention in Birmingham, Alabama.²¹

Finally, in June of 1909 the pro-Wilcox faction sued the other faction for utilizing the name of the Stonewall Jackson Camp. They demanded the eleven members of the McChesney faction, including McChesney, cease utilizing the name. The chancery court ruled in favor of the pro-Wilcox faction issuing an injunction against McChesney and the others from utilizing the name Stonewall Jackson Camp.²² McChesney was not done yet, a growing feeling of principle emerged from his fight with the Stonewall Jackson Camp members. It cannot be determined when exactly McChesney had held suspicions of the service records of some of the members within the Camp. According to the minutes of the Stonewall Jackson Camp, upon McChesney's reinstatement as Adjutant, back in March 1908, the following resolution was voiced and adopted by the camp: "That this Camp as every Camp is required to do- under Article III- Section 5- of the Constitution U.C.V. Exact of each applicant for membership in its ranks satisfactory proof of honorable service in the Army and Navy of the Confederate States and an honorable discharge or release therefrom."²³ This resolution would be carried on to the formation of a new U.C.V. Camp created by McChesney, the Robert E. Lee Camp. Soon after McChesney began sending out

²¹ James Z. McChesney, *Minutes*, 9-10

²² *Stonewall Jackson Camp v. Alderson* (West Virginia Kanawha County Chancery Court, 1909) microfilm located at State Archives, Charleston WV.

²³ McChesney, *Minutes*, 11.

letters to various former veterans asking if they would vouch for a prospecting applicant and that the applicant had served honorably until April 9th 1865, the day of Lee's surrender.²⁴

The splitting of the two groups into two different chapters did not fix the relationship. The use of the name may have been settled, but there still remained the underlying issues surrounding the service record of some of the members. McChesney attained verification through the adjutant general of the War Dept. who furnished service records that McChesney requested. They showed that several members had not been forthcoming with the details of their service. Dr. Wilcox had been imprisoned in 1864, and was released upon swearing the oath of allegiance and claiming to have been forced into Confederate service.²⁵ Dr. Laurence Carr was found to have never served. C.C. Watts another pro-Wilcox member was also found to have never served.²⁶ Vice-Commander of the Stonewall Jackson Camp, John Vickers, even left the Stonewall Jackson Camp due to the allegations, since his name appears on one of the application letters.²⁷ McChesney wrote that the members that separated from the Stonewall Jackson Camp, did so because of their acceptance of deserters and imposters.²⁸

During the subsequent years following the court case, McChesney accepted dozens of new applications from Confederate Veterans who had never expressed a desire to join the original Stonewall Jackson Camp. McChesney filed these applications through the adjutant

²⁴ James Z. McChesney, Robert E. Lee Camp #887 Correspondence 1910-1914, *United Confederate Veterans Records*. West Virginia State Archives Library, Charleston, WV.

²⁵ F. C. Ainsworth, letter to James Z. McChesney on September 28, 1911, Found within the *United Confederate Veterans Records*, West Virginia State Archives Library, Charleston, WV.

²⁶ J. Coleman Alderson, letter to General William E. Mickle, Found within the *United Confederate Veterans Records*, West Virginia State Archives Library, Charleston, WV.

²⁷ James Z. McChesney, letter to D.C. Lovett on July 21, 1909. *United Confederate Veterans Records*. West Virginia State Archives. Charleston, WV.

²⁸ James Z. McChesney, letter to General Bennett Young on January 3rd, 1914. *United Confederate Veterans Records*, West Virginia State Archives, Charleston WV.

general in the war department to make sure they were *honorably* discharged.²⁹ While the Robert E. Lee Camp grew in leaps and bounds, the Stonewall Jackson Chapter hovered around one hundred members.³⁰ The claims that they appeared to harbor deserters and imposters did not weaken the Camp, but made it harder for them to accept members who felt a greater devotion to the cause.

The Robert E. Lee Camp continued its campaign against these deserters by lobbying the State Division to act upon the suspicious service records of the Stonewall Jackson Camp's members. In October 1912, they appealed at the meeting in Moorefield who then submitted the request to the Committee of Credentials. The Committee viewed McChesney's meticulous evidence against the Stonewall Jackson Camp and ruled that it had knowingly accepted members who were ineligible and recommended suspension of the Camp. The Convention unanimously adopted the resolution and suspended the Camp. However, in May of 1913 the members of the Stonewall Jackson Camp called on the federal organization to lift the ban on their suspension. No doubt not wishing to interfere in the state organization, the request was passed along to the new Commander of the West Virginia Division, General Peyton, who without consulting any other authorities reinstated the Camp. The final battle between the two groups appears to have been conducted at the annual state convention held in Huntington in October 1913. When word was received of the reinstatement, the resolution was brought to the floor of the convention, and according to McChesney, "in order to prevent investigation, certain gentlemen, who were acting in the interest of the Stonewall Jackson Camp...declared the resolution confirming General

²⁹ James Z. McChesney, *Correspondence 1909-1914*, United Confederate Veterans Records , West Virginia State Archives, Charleston WV.

³⁰ Stonewall Jackson Roster of 1913, *United Confederate Veterans Records*, West Virginia State Archives Library, Charleston, WV.

Peyton's order, carried." The Camp was reinstated and the Robert E. Lee Camp tried to force the national organization to intervene but to no avail.³¹

While not all veterans' organizations kept such extensive records on their members, the attention to detail was characteristic of the strength of veterans' war-time convictions. The ardent defense of the Lost Cause among these veterans illustrated the serious matter that a veterans' service record played in this controversy. Although these men were active in their community, conducted their businesses admirably, and led lives of good nature and humor it was their actions in the war that defined them. Service to the very end became a necessary clause that limited and denied access to many veterans. While it may not have mattered to some veterans how long or to when a veteran served there is no denying that the distinction once made, split the efforts of the Confederate veterans between two organizations. Newspaper coverage of subsequent Decoration Day commemorations saw a divided program that split veterans on the most important day of remembrance. Although speeches were given, graves decorated, it could not be ignored by attendees that half of the town's active veterans were boycotting the other's commemoration.³²

The splitting of the Charleston Confederate veterans' Camp demonstrates that although these two groups wanted to shape public memory of the war, because of their inability to settle on this issue of honorable service, they failed to present an image of unified fraternal veterans. Without their united presence, we see no more monument making, no defense against anti-Southern teaching, and a divided Decoration Day celebration. This divided the attention and funds required to emphasize elements of the Lost Cause in the community and within the minds

³¹ The entire paragraph is a paraphrase of James Z. McChesney, letter to General Bennett Young on January 3rd, 1914. United Confederate Veterans Records, West Virginia State Archives, Charleston WV.

³² *Charleston Gazette*, "Confederate Memorial Fittingly Observed," June 4th 1909, Moses W. Donnally.; *Charleston Gazette*, "1911, 1912, 1913, 1914, and 1915.

of the townspeople. The fracturing demonstrated by these Confederate veterans is an important reminder to Civil War historians that analyze these memorial groups; they were not always unified just because of their Confederate service. Other factors heavily influenced the dynamics of the organization, and served to undermine its goals.

Nationally a unified message of Confederate bravery and sacrifice was needed in order to give a sense of purpose to four long years of war that precipitated a bitter defeat. To Confederates who upheld an honorable defeat like a laurel of pride, the inclusion of those who acted selfishly weakened the unity of this collective Confederate myth. Deserters and traitors are characteristic of all wars, but the Confederates could not have such figures within their mythical past as it served to undermine the romantic ideals that they tried to convey to future generations. It would appear that a national division along such lines would have led to the blunting of the Confederate myth making process of the Lost Cause, but it remains to be seen how such an issue was handled by those promoting a heroic past when faced with the un-heroic realities of the war.

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